JESS.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD,

Author of "King Solomon's Mines," "She," etc.

"I was out attending a poor fellow who was shot through the lung, and that fool of a woman waited for me to come back, instead of following. I have brought you an orderly instead of her. By Jove, he has bled! I suppose the silk has slipped. Well, there is only one thing for it. Orderly, the chloroform."

And then followed another long half hour of slashing and tying and horror, and when at last the unfortunate John opened his eyes again he was too weak to speak, and could only smile feebly. For three days after this he was in a dangerous state, for if the artery had broken out for the third time the chances were that, having so little blood left in his veins, he would die before anything could be done for him. At times he was very delirious from weakness, and these were the dangerous hours, for it was almost impossible to keep him quiet, and every movement threw Jess into an agony of terror lest the silk fastenings of the artery should break away. Indeed, there was only one way in which she could keep him quiet, and that was by laying her slim white hand upon his forehead or giving it to him to hold. Oddly enough, this had more effect upon his fevered mind than anything else. For hour after hour she would sit thus, though her arm ached and her back felt as if it were going to break in two, until at last she was rewarded by seeing his wild eyes cease their wanderings and close in peaceful sleep.

Yet with it all that week was perhaps the happiest time in her life. There he lay, the man she loved with all the intensity of her deep nature; and she ministered to him, and felt that he loved her, and depended on her as a babe upon its mother. Even in his delirium her name was continually on his lips, and generally with some endearing term before it. She felt in those dark hours of doubt and sickness as though they two were growing life to life, knit up in a divine identity she could not analyze or understand. She felt that it was so, and she believed that, once being so, whatever her future might be, that communion could never be dissolved, and therefore was she happy, though she knew that his recovery meant their lifelong separation. For though Jess had once, when thrown utterly off her balance, given her passion sway, it was not a thing she meant to repeat. She had, she felt, injured Bessie enough already in taking her future husband's heart. That she could not help now, but she would take no more. John should go back to her sister.

And so she sat and gazed at that sleeping man through the long watches of the night and was happy. There lay her joy. Soon he would be taken from her and she would be left desolate, but while he lay there he was hers. It was passing sweet to her woman's heart to lay her hand upon him and see him sleep, for this desire to watch the sleep of a beloved object is one of the highest and strangest manifestations of passion. Truly, and with a keen insight into the human heart, has the poet said that there is no joy like the joy of a woman watching what she loves asleep.

The time went on and the artery broke out no more, and then at last came a morning when John opened his eyes and watched the pale, earnest face bending over him as though he were trying to remember something. Presently he shut his eyes again. He had remembered.

"I have been very ill, Jess," he said, after a pause.

"Yes, John."

"And you have nursed me?"

"Yes, John."

"Am I going to recover?"

"Of course you are."

He shut his eyes again.

"I suppose there is no news from outside?"

"No more; things are just the same."

"Nor from Bessie?"

"None; we are quite cut off."

Then came a pause.

"John," said Jess, "I want to say something to you. When people are delirious, or when delirium is coming on, they sometimes say things that they are not responsible for, and which had better be forgotten."

"Yes," he said; "I understand."

"So," she went on, in the same measured tone, "we will forget everything you may

"WE WILL FORGET EVERYTHING."

fancy that you said or that I did since the time when you came in wounded and found that I had fainted."

"Quite so," said John; "I renounce them all."

"We renounce them all," she corrected, and gave a solemn little nod of her head and sighed, and thus they ratified that audacious compact of oblivion.

But it was a lie, and they both knew that it was a lie. If love had existed before, was there anything in his helplessness and her long and tender care to make it less? Alas! no; rather was their companionship the more perfect and their sympathy the more complete. "Propinquity, sir; propinquity," as the wise man said; we know the evils of it.

From that day forward they forgot that scene in the sitting room of "The Palatial," when Jess put out her strength and John bent and broke before it like a rush before the wind. Surely it was a part of the delirium! They forgot that now, alas! they loved each other with a love that did but gather force from its despair. They talked of Bessie, and of John's marriage, and discussed Jess' plans for going to Europe, just as though these were not matters of spiritual life and death to each of them. In short, however they might for one brief moment have gone astray, now, to their honor be it said, they followed the path of duty with unflinching feet, nor did they cry when the stones cut them.

But it was all a living lie, and they knew it. For between them stood the irrevocable Past, who for good or evil had bound them together in his unchanging bonds, and with cords that could not be broken.

CHAPTER XIX.

HANS COETZEE COMES TO PRETORIA.

When once he had taken the turn, John's recovery was rapid. Naturally of a vigorous constitution, when the artery had fairly united he soon made up for the great loss of blood which he had undergone, and a little more than a month from the date of his wound was, physically, almost as good a man as ever.

One morning—it was the 20th of March—Jess and he were sitting in "The Palatial" garden. John was lying in a long cane deck chair that Jess had borrowed or stolen out of one of the deserted houses, and smoking a pipe.

They sat in silence; John puffing away at his pipe, and Jess, her work—one of his socks—lying idly upon her knees, with her hands clasped over it and her eyes fixed upon the lights and shadows that played with broad fingers upon the wooded slopes beyond.

John finished his pipe, and, although she did not know it, was watching her face, which, now that she was off her guard, was no longer impassive, but seemed to mirror the tender and glorious hope that was floating through her mind. Her lips were slightly parted, and her wide eyes were full of a soft, strange light, while on the whole countenance was a look of eager thought and spiritualized desire such as he had known portrayed in ancient masterpieces upon the face of the virgin mother. Jess was not, except as regards her eyes and hair, even a good looking person. But at that moment John thought that her face was touched with a diviner beauty than he had yet seen on the face of woman. It thrilled him and appealed to him, not as Bessie's beauty had appealed, but to that other side of his nature, of which Jess alone could turn the key. Her face was more like the face of a spirit than a human being's, and it almost frightened him to see it.

"Jess," he said at last, "what are you thinking of?"

She started, and her face resumed its normal air. It was as though a mask had been suddenly set upon it.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"Because I want to know. I never saw you look like that before."

She laughed a little.

"You would think me foolish if I told you what I was thinking about. Never mind, it has gone wherever thoughts go. I will tell you what I am thinking about now, which is—that it is about time we got out of this place. My uncle and Bessie will be half distracted."

"We've had more than two months of it now. The relieving column can't be far off," suggested John; for these foolish people in Pretoria labored under a firm belief that one fine morning they would be gratified with the sight of the light dancing down a long line of British bayonets, and of Boers evaporating in every direction like storm clouds before the sun.

Jess shook her head. She was beginning to lose faith in relieving columns that never came.

"If we don't help ourselves, my opinion is that we may stop here till we are starved out, which we pretty well are. However, it's no use talking about it, so I'm off to get our rations. Let's see, have you got everything you want?"

"Everything, thanks."

"Well,, then, mind you stop quiet till I come back."

"Why," laughed John, "I am as strong as a horse."

"Possibly; but that is what the doctor said, you know. Good-bye!" And Jess took her big basket and started on what John used to feebly call her "rational undertaking."

She had not got fifty paces from the door before she suddenly caught sight of a familiar form seated on a familiar pony. The form was fat and jovial looking, and the pony was small but also fat. It was Hans Coetzee—none other!

Jess could hardly believe her eyes. Old Hans in Pretoria! What could it mean?

"Om Coetzee! Om Coetzee!" she called, as he came ambling past her, evidently making for the Heidelberg road.

The old Boer pulled up his pony, and gazed around him in a mystified way.

"Here, Om Coetzee! Here!"

"Allemachter!" he said, jerking his pony round. "It's you, Missie Jess, is it? Now who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"Who would have thought of seeing *you* here?" she answered.

"Yes, yes; it seems strange; I dare say that it seems strange. But I am a messenger of peace, like Uncle Noah's dove in the ark, you know. The fact is," and he glanced round to see if anybody were listening, "I have been sent by the government to arrange about an exchange of prisoners."

"The government! What government?"

"What government? Why, the triumvirate, of course—whom may the Lord bless and prosper as he did Jonah when he walked on the wall of the city."

"Joshua, when he walked round the wall of the city," suggested Jess. "Jonah walked down the whale's throat."

"Ah! to be sure, so he did, and blew a trumpet inside. I remember now; though I am sure I don't know how he did it. The fact is that our glorious victories have quite confused me. Ah! what a thing it is to be a patriot! The dear Lord makes strong the arm of the patriot, and takes care that he hits his man well in the middle."

"You have turned wonderfully patriotic all of a sudden, Om Coetzee," said Jess, tartly.

"Yes, missie, yes; I am a patriot to the bone of my back. I hate the English government; d—n the English government! Let us have our land back and our volksraad. Almighty! I saw who was in the right at Laing's Nek there. Ah, those poor rooibaatjes! I shot four of them myself; two as they came up and two as they ran away, and the last one went head over heels like a buck. Poor man! I cried for him afterward. I did not like going to fight at all, but Frank Muller sent to me and said that if I did not go he would have me shot. Ah, he is a devil of a man, that Frank Muller! So I went, and when I saw how the dear Lord had put it into the heart of the English general to be a bigger fool even that day than he is every day, and to try and drive us out of Laing's Nek with a thousand of his poor rooibaatjes, then, I tell you, I saw where the right lay, and I said, 'D—n the English government! What is the English government doing here?' and after Ingogo I said it again."

"Never mind all that, Om Coetzee," broke in Jess. "I have heard you tell a different tale before, and perhaps you will again. Tell me, how are my uncle and my sister? Are they at the farm?"

"Almighty! you don't suppose that I have been there to see, do you? But, yes, I have heard they are there. It is a nice place, that Mooifontein, and I think that I shall buy it when we have turned all you English people out of the land. Frank Muller told me that they were there. And now I must be getting on, or that devil of a man, Frank Muller, will want to know what I have been about."

"Om Coetzee," said Jess, "will you do something for me? We are old friends, you know, and I once persuaded my uncle to lend you £500 when all your oxen died of the lungsick."

"Yes, yes, it shall be paid back one day—when we have got the d—d Englishmen out of the country." And he began to gather up his reins preparatory to riding off.

"Will you do me a favor?" said Jess, catching the pony by the bridle.

"What is it? What is it, missie? I must be getting on. That devil of a man, Frank Muller, is waiting for me with the prisoners at the Rooihuis Kraal."

"I want a pass for myself and Capt. Niel, and an escort. We want to get down home."

The old Boer held up his fat hands in amazement.

"Almighty!" he said, "it is impossible. A pass—who ever heard of such a thing? Come, I must be going."

"It is not impossible, Uncle Coetzee, as you know," said Jess. "Listen! If I get that pass I will speak to my uncle about the £500. Perhaps he would not want it all back again."

"Ah!" said the Boer. "Well, we are old friends, missie, and 'never desert a friend,' that is my saying. Almighty! I will ride a hundred miles—I will swim through blood for a friend. Well, well, I will see. It will depend upon that devil of a man, Frank Muller. Where are you to be found—in the white house yonder? Good. To-morrow the escort will come in with the prisoners, and if I can get it they will bring the pass. But, missie, remember the £500. If you do not speak to your uncle about that I shall be even with him. Almighty! what a thing it is to have a good heart and to love to help your friends! Well, good day, good day," and off he cantered on his fat pony, his broad face shining with a look of unutterable benevolence.

Jess cast a look of contempt after him and then went on toward the camp to fetch the rations.

When she got back to "The Palatial" she told John what had taken place, and suggested that it would be as well, in case there should be a favorable reply to her request, to have everything prepared for a start, and accordingly the cart was brought down and stood outside "The Palatial," and John unscrewed the patent caps and filled them with castor oil, and ordered Mouti to keep the horses, which were all well, though "poor" from want of proper food, well within hail.

Meanwhile, old Hans pursued the jerky tenor of his way for an hour or so, till he came in sight of a small red house.

Presently, from the shadow in front of the red house emerged a horseman, mounted on a powerful black horse. The horseman—a stern, handsome, bearded man—put his hand about his eyes to shade them from the sun, and gazed up the road. Then he seemed to suddenly strike his spurs into the horse, for the animal gave a sudden bound forward, and came sweeping towards Hans at a hand gallop.

"Ah! it is that devil of a man, Frank Muller!" ejaculated Hans. "Now I wonder what he wants? I always feel cold down the back when he comes near me."

By this time the plunging black horse was being reined up alongside of his pony so sharply that it reared till its great hoofs were pawing the air within a few inches of Hans' head.

"Almighty!" said the old man, tugging his pony round. "Be careful, nephew, be careful! I do not wish to be crushed like a beetle."

Frank Muller—for it was he—smiled. He had made his horse rear purposely, in order to frighten the old man, whom he knew to be an arrant coward.

"Why have you been so long? and what have you done with the Englishmen? You should have been back half an hour ago."

"And so I should, nephew, and so I should, if I had not been detained. Surely you do not suppose that I would linger in the accursed place? Bah!" and he spat upon the ground, "it stinks of Englishmen. I cannot get the taste of them out of my mouth."

"Your are a liar, Uncle Coetzee," was the cool answer. "English with the English, Boer with the Boer. You blow neither hot nor cold. Be careful lest we show you up. I know you and your talk. Do you remember what you were saying to the Englishman Niel in the inn yard at Wakkerstroom when you turned and saw me? I heard, and I do not forget. You know what happens to a 'land betrayer?'"

Hans' teeth positively chattered, and his florid face blanched with fear.

"What do you mean, nephew?" he asked.

"I—ah!—I mean nothing. I was only speaking a word of warning to you as a friend. I have heard things said about you by"—and he dropped his voice and whispered a name at the sound of which poor Hans turned whiter than ever.

"Well," went on his tormentor, when he had sufficiently enjoyed his terror, "what sort of terms did you make in Pretoria?"

"Oh, good, nephew, good," he gabbled, delighted to get on a fresh subject. "I found the Englishmen supple as a tanned skin. They will give up their twelve prisoners for our four. The men are to be in by 10 to-morrow. I told their commandant about Laing's Nek and Ingogo, and he would not believe me. He thought I lied like himself. They are getting hungry there now. I saw a Hottentot I knew there, and he told me that their bones were beginning to show."

"They will be through the skin before long," muttered Frank. "Well, here we are at the house. The general is there. He has just come up from Heidelberg, and you can make your report to him. Did you find out about the Englishman—Capt. Niel? Is it true that he is dead?"

"No, he is not dead. By the way, I met Om Croft's niece—the dark one. She is shut up there with the captain, and she begged me to try and get them a pass to go home. Of course I told her that it was nonsense, and that they must stop and starve with the others."

Muller, who had been listening to this last piece of information with intense interest, suddenly checked his horse and answered:

"Did you? Then you are a bigger fool than I thought you. Who gave you authority to decide whether they should have a pass or not?"

CHAPTER XX.

THE GREAT MAN.

Completely overcome by this last remark, Hans collapsed like a jelly fish out of water, and reflected in his worthless old heart that Frank Muller was indeed "a devil of a man." By this time they had reached the door of the little house and were dismounting, and in another minute Hans found himself in the presence of one of the leaders of the rebellion.

He was a short, ugly man of about 55, with a big nose, small eyes, straight hair and a stoop. The forehead, however, was good, and the whole face betrayed a keenness and ability far beyond the average. The great man was seated at a plain deal table, writing something with evident difficulty upon a dirty sheet of paper, and smoking a very large pipe.

"Sit, heeren, sit," he said when they entered, waving the stem of his pipe toward a deal bench. Accordingly they sat down without even removing their hats, and, pulling out their pipes, proceeded to light them.

"How, in the name of God, do you spell 'excellency?'" asked the general, presently. "I have spelled it in four different ways, and each one looks worse than the last."

Frank Muller gave the required information. Hans in his heart thought he spelled it wrong, but he did not dare to say so. Then came another pause, only interrupted by the slow scratching of a quill across the dirty paper, during which Hans nearly went to sleep; for the weather was very hot, and he was tired with his ride.

"There!" said the writer, presently, gazing at his handwriting with an almost childish air of satisfaction, "that is done. A curse on the man who invented writing! Our fathers did very well without it; why should not we? Though, to be sure, it is useful for treaties with the Kaffirs. I don't believe you have told me right now about that 'excellency,' nephew. Well, it will have to serve. When a man writes such a letter as that to the representative of the English queen he needn't mind his spelling; it will be swallowed with the rest," and he leaned back in his chair and laughed softly.

"Well, Meinheer Coetzee, what is it? Ah, I know; the prisoners. Well, what did you do?"

Hans told his story, and was rambling on when the general cut him short.

"So cousin, so! You talk like an ox wagon—rumble and creak and jolt, a devil of a noise and turning of wheels, but very little progress. They will give up the twelve men for our four, will they? Well, that is about a fair proportion. No, it is not, though; four Boers are better than twelve Englishmen any day—ay, better than forty!" and he laughed again. "Well, the men shall be sent in as you arranged; they will help to eat up their last biscuits. Good day, cousin. Stop, though; one word before you go. I have heard about you at times, cousin. I have heard it said that you cannot be trusted. Now, I don't know if that is so. I don't believe it myself. Only, listen; if it should be so, and I should find you out, by God! I will have you cut into rimpis with aftervox sjambocks, and then shoot you and send in your carcass as a present to the English," and as he said it he leaned forward and brought down his fist upon the deal table with a bang that produced a most unpleasant effect upon poor Hans' nerves, and a cold gleam of sudden ferocity flickered in the small eyes, very discomforting for a timid man to behold, however innocent he knew himself to be.

"I swear"—he began to babble.

"Swear not at all, cousin; you are an elder of the church. There is no need to, besides. I told you I did not believe it of you; only I have had one or two cases of this sort of thing lately. No, never mind who they were. You will not meet them about again. Good day, cousin, good day. Forget not to thank the Almighty God for our glorious victories. He will expect it from an elder of the church."

Poor Hans departed crestfallen, feeling that the days of him who tries, however skilfully and impartially, to sit upon two stools at once are not happy days, and sometimes threaten to be short ones. And supposing that the Englishmen should win after all—as in his heart he hoped they might—how should he then prove that he had hoped it? The general watched him waddle through the door from under his pent brows, a half humorous, half menacing expression on his face.

"A windbag; a coward; a man without a heart for good or for evil. Bah! nephew, that is Hans Coetzee. I have known him for years. Well, let him go. He would sell us if he could, but I have frightened him now, and, what is more, if I see reason, he shall find I never bark unless I mean to bite. Well, enough of him. Let me see, have I thanked you yet for your share in Majuba? Ah! that was a glorious victory! How many were there of you when you started up the mountain?"

"Eighty men."

"And how many at the end?"

"One hundred and seventy—perhaps a few more."

"And how many of you were hit?"

"Three—one killed, two wounded, and a few scratched."

"Wonderful, wonderful! It was a brave deed, and because it was so brave it was successful. He must have been mad, that English general. Who shot him?"

"Breytenbach. Colley held up a white handkerchief in his hand, and Breytenbach fired, and down went the general all of a heap, and then they all ran helter skelter down the hill. Yes, it was a wonderful thing! They could have beat us back with their left hand. That is what comes of having a righteous cause, uncle."

The general smiled grimly. "That is what comes of having men who can shoot, and who understand the country, and are not afraid. Well, it is done, and well done. The stars in their courses have fought for us, Frank Muller, and so far we have conquered. But how is it to end? You are no fool; tell me, how will it end?"

Frank Muller rose and walked twice up and down the room before he answered. "Shall I tell you?" he asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, went on: "It will end in our getting the country back. That is what this armistice means. There are thousands of rooibaatjes there at the Nek; they cannot therefore be waiting for soldiers. They are waiting for an opportunity to yield, uncle. We shall get the country back, and you will be president of the republic."

The old man took a pull at his pipe. "You have a long head, Frank, and it has not run away with you. The English government is going to give in. The stars in their courses continue to fight for us. The English government is as mad as its officers. They will give in. But it means more than that, Frank; I will tell you what it means. It means"—and again he let his heavy hand fall upon the deal table—"the triumph of the Boer throughout South Africa. Bah! Burgers was not such a fool after all when he talked of his great Dutch republic. I have been twice to England now, and I know the Englishman. I could measure him for his veldtschoens (shoes). He knows nothing—nothing. He understands his shop, he is buried in his shop, and can think of nothing else. Sometimes he goes away and starts his shop in other places, and buries himself in it, and makes it a big shop, because he understands shops. But it is all a question of shops, and if the shops abroad interfere with the shops at home, or if it is thought that they do, which comes to the same thing, then the shops at home put an end to the shops abroad. Bah! they talk a great deal there in England, but, at the bottom of it, it is shop, shop, shop. They talk of honor, and patriotism too, but they both give way to the shop. And I tell you this, Frank Muller; it is the shop that has made the English, and it is the shop that will destroy them. Well, so be it. We shall have our slice; Africa for the Africanders. The Transvaal for the Transvaalers first, then the rest. Shepstone was a clever man; he would have made it all into an English shop, with the black men for shop boys. We have changed all that, but we ought to be grateful to Shepstone. The English have paid our debts, they have eaten up the Zulus, who would otherwise have destroyed us, and they have let us beat them, and now we are going to have our turn again, and, as you say, I shall be the first president."

"Yes, uncle," replied the younger man, calmly, "and I shall be the second."

The great man looked at him. "You are a bold man," he said; "but boldness makes the man and the country. I dare say you will. You have the head; and one clear head can turn many fools, as the rudder does the ship, and guide them when they are turned. I dare say that you will be president one day."

"Yes, I shall be president, and when I am I will drive the Englishmen out of South Africa. This I will do with the help of the Natal Zulus. Then I will destroy the natives, as T'Chaka destroyed, keeping only enough for slaves. That is my plan uncle; it is a good one."

"It is a big one; I am not certain that it is a good one. But, good or bad, who shall say? You may carry it out, nephew, if you live. A man with brains and wealth may carry out anything if he lives. But there is a God. I believe, Frank Muller, that there is a God, and I believe that God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far, God kills him. If you live, Frank Muller, you will do these things, but perhaps God will kill you. Who can say? You will do what God wills, not what you will."

The elder man was speaking seriously now. Muller felt that this was none of the whining cant people in authority among the Boers find it desirable to adopt. It was what he thought, and it chilled Muller in spite of his pretended skepticism, as the sincere belief of an intellectual man, however opposite to our own, is apt to chill us into doubt of ourselves and our opinions. For a moment his slumbering superstition awoke, and he felt half afraid. Between him and that bright future of blood and power lay a chill gulf. Suppose that gulf should be death, and the future nothing but a dream—or worse! His face fell as the idea occurred to him, and the general noticed it.

"Well," he went on, "he who lives will see. Meanwhile you have done good service to the state, and you shall have your reward, cousin. If I am president"—he laid emphasis on this, the meaning of which his listener did not miss—"if by the support of my followers I become president, I will not forget you. And now I must upsaddle and get back. I want to be at Laing's Nek in sixty hours, to wait for Gen. Wood's answer. You will see about the sending in of those prisoners;" and he knocked out his pipe and rose.

"By the way, meinheer," said Muller, suddenly adopting a tone of respect, "I have a favor to ask."

"What is it, nephew?"

"I want a pass for two friends of mine—English people—in Pretoria to go down to their relations in Wakkerstroom district. They sent a message to me by Hans Coetzee."

"I don't like giving passes," answered the general with some irritation. "You know what it means, letting out messengers. I wonder you ask me."

"It is a small favor, meinheer, and I do not think that it will much matter. Pretoria will not be besieged much longer. I am under an obligation to the people."

"Well, well, as you like; but, if any harm comes of it, you will be held responsible. Write the pass; I will sign it."

Frank Muller sat down and wrote and dated the paper. Its contents were simple: "Pass the bearers unharmed."

"That is big enough to drive a wagon along," said the general, when it was handed to him to sign. "It might mean all Pretoria."

"I am not certain if there are two or three of them," answered Muller, carelessly.

"Well, well, you are responsible. Give me the pen;" and he scrawled his big, coarse signature at the foot.

"I propose, with your permission, to escort the cart down with two other men. As you are aware, I go down to take over the command of the Wakkerstroom district to-morrow."

"Very good. It is your affair. You are responsible. I shall ask no questions, provided your friends do no hurt to the cause;" and he left the room without another word.

When the great man had gone Frank Muller sat down again on the bench and looked at the pass, and communed with himself, for he was far too wise a man to commune with anybody else. "The Lord hath delivered mine enemy into mine hand," he said, with a smile, and stroked his golden beard. "Well, well, I will not waste his merciful opportunities as I did that day out buck shooting. And then for Bessie. I suppose I shall have to kill the old man, too. I am sorry for that, but it can't be helped; besides, if anything should happen to Jess, Bessie will take Mooifontein, and that is worth having. Not that I want more land; I have enough. Yes, I will marry her. It would serve her right if I didn't; but, after all, marriage is more respectable, and also one has more hold of a wife. Nobody will interfere for her. Then she will be of use to me by and by, for a beautiful woman is a power even among these fellow countrymen of mine, if only a man knows how to bait his lines with her. Yes, I shall marry her. Bah! that is the way to win a woman—by capture; and, what is more, they like it. It makes her worth winning, too. It will be a courtship of blood. Well, the kisses will be the sweeter, and in the end she will love me the more for what I have dared for her. So, Frank Muller, so! Ten years ago you said to yourself: 'There are three things worth having in the world—first, wealth; second, women, if they take your fancy, or, better still, one woman if you desire her above all others; third, power.' Now, you have got the wealth, for one way and another you are the richest man in the Transvaal. In a week's time you will have the woman you love, and who is sweeter to you than all the world besides. In five years' time you will have the power—absolute power. That old man is clever; he will be president. But I am cleverer. I shall soon take his seat, thus"—and he rose and seated himself in the general's chair—"and he will go down a step and take mine. Ay, and then I will reign. My tongue shall be honey and my hand iron. I will pass over the land like a storm. I will drive the English out with the help of the Kaffirs, and then I will kill the Kaffirs and take their land. Ah!"—and his eyes flashed and his nostrils dilated as he said it to himself—"then life will be worth living! What a thing is power! What a thing it is to be able to destroy! Take that Englishman, my rival; to-day he is well and strong; in three days he will be gone utterly, and I—I shall have sent him away. That is power. But when the time comes that I have only to stretch out my hand to send thousands after him!—that will be absolute power; and then with Bessie I shall be happy."

HE SCRAWLED HIS BIG, COARSE SIGNATURE.

And so he dreamed on for an hour or more, till at last the fumes of his untutored imagination actually drowned his reason in spiritual intoxication. Picture after picture rose and unrolled itself before his mind's eye. He saw himself as president addressing the volksraad and compelling it to his will. He saw himself, the supreme general of a great host, defeating the forces of England with awful carnage and driving them before him; ay, he even selected the battle ground on the slopes of the Biggarsgerg in Natal. Then he saw himself again sweeping the natives out of South Africa with the unrelenting besom of his might and ruling unquestioned over a submissive people. And, last of all, he saw something glittering at his feet—it was a crown!

This was the climax of his intoxication. Then there came an anticlimax. The rich imagination which had been leading him on as a gaudy butterfly does a child, suddenly changed color and dropped to earth; and then rose up in his mind the memory of the general's words: "God sets a limit to a man's doings. If he is going too far God kills him."

The butterfly had settled on a coffin!

CHAPTER XXI.

JESS GETS A PASS.

About 10:30 on the morning following her interview with Hans Coetzee, Jess was at "The Palatial" as usual, and John was just finishing packing the cart with such few goods as they possessed. There was not much chance of its being of any material use, for he did not in the slightest degree expect that they would get the pass; but, as he cheerfully said, it was as good an amusement as any other.

"I say, Jess," he sung out presently, "come here."

"What for?" answered Jess, who was seated on the doorstep mending something, and looking at her favorite view.

"Because I want to speak to you."

She got up and went, feeling rather angry with herself for going.

"Well," she said, tartly, "here I am. What is it?"

"I have finished packing the cart, that's all."

"And you mean to tell me that you have brought me round here to say that?"

"Yes, of course I have; exercise is good for the young." And then he laughed, and she laughed too.

It was all nothing—nothing at all—but somehow it was very delightful. Certainly mutual affection, even when unexpressed, has a way of making things go happily, and can find something to laugh at anywhere.

Just then, who should come up but Mrs. Neville, in a great state of excitement, and, as usual, fanning herself with her hat.

"What do you think, Capt. Niel? the prisoners have come in, and I heard one of the Boers in charge say that he had a pass signed by the Boer general for some English people, and that he was coming over to see about them presently. Who can it be?"

"It is us," said Jess, quickly. "We are going home. I saw Hans Coetzee yesterday, and begged him to try and get us a pass, and I suppose he has."

"My word! going to get out? Well, you are lucky! Let me sit down and write a letter to my great uncle at the Cape. You must post it when you can. He is 94 and rather soft, but I dare say he will like to hear from me," and she bundled off into the house to give her aged relative (who, by the way, labored under the impression that she was still a little girl of 4 years of age) as minute an account of the siege of Pretoria as time would allow.

"Well, John, you had better tell Mouti to put the horses in. We shall have to start presently," said Jess.

"Ay," he said, pulling his beard thoughtfully, "I suppose that we shall;" adding, by way of an afterthought: "Are you glad to go?"

"No!" she said with a sudden flash of passion and a stamp of the foot, and then turned and entered the house again.

"Mouti," said John to the Zulu, who was lounging around in a way characteristic of that intelligent but unindustrious race, "inspan the horses. We are going back to Mooifontein."

"Koos" (chief), said the Zulu unconcernedly and started on the errand as though it were the most every day occurrence to drive off home out of a closely beleaguered town. That is another beauty of the Zulu race; you cannot astonish them. They, no doubt, consider that that, to them, extraordinary mixture of wisdom and insanity, the white man, is, as the agnostic French critic said in despair of the prophet Zerubbabel, "capable de tout."

John stood and watched the inspanning absently. The fact was that he, too, was unconscious of a sensation of regret. He felt ashamed of himself for it, but there it was; he was sorry to leave the place. For the last week or so he had been living in a dream, and everything outside that dream was blurred and indistinct as a landscape in a fog. He knew the things were there, but he did not quite appreciate their relative size and position. The only real thing was his dream; all else was as vague as those far off people and events that we lose in infancy and find again in old age.

And now there would be an end of dreaming; the fog would lift, and he must face the facts. Jess, with whom he had dreamed, would go away to Europe and he would marry Bessie, and all this Pretoria business would glide away into the past like a watch in the night. Well, it must be so; it was right and proper that it should be so, and he for one was not going to flinch from his duty; but he would have been more than human had he not felt the pang of awakening. It was all so very unfortunate.

By this time Mouti had got the horses up, and asked if he was to inspan.

"No! wait a bit," said John. "Very likely it is all rot," he added to himself.

Scarcely were the words out of his mouth when he caught sight of two armed Boers of a peculiarly unpleasant type and rough appearance riding across the veldt toward "The Palatial" gate, escorted by four carbineers. At the gate they stopped, and one of them dismounted and came up to where he was standing by the stable door.

"Capt. Niel?" he said interrogatively in English.

"That is my name."

"Then here is a letter for you," and he handed him a folded paper.

John opened it—it had no envelope—and read as follows:

"SIR—The bearer of this has with him a pass, which it is understood that you desire, giving you and Miss Jess Croft a safe conduct to Mooifontein, in the Wakkerstroom district of the republic. The only condition attached to the pass, which is signed by one of the honorable triumvirate, is that you must carry no dispatches out of Pretoria. Upon your giving your word of honor to the bearer that you will not do this he will hand you the pass."

This letter, which was fairly written and in good English, had no signature.

"Who wrote this?" asked John of the Boer.

"That is no affair of yours," was the curt reply. "Will you pass your word about the dispatches?"

"Yes."

"Good. Here is the pass," and he handed over that document to John. It was in the same handwriting as the letter, but signed by the Boer general.

John examined it and then called to Jess to come and translate it. She was on her way round the corner of the house as he did so, having heard the voice of the Boer.

"It means, 'Pass the bearers unharmed,'" she said, "and the signature is correct. I have seen the general's signature before."

"When must we start?" asked John.

"At once, or not at all."

"I must drive round by the headquarter camp to explain about my going. They will think that I have run away."

To this the Boer demurred, but finally, after going to the gate to consult his companion, consented, and the two rode back to the headquarter camp, saying that they would wait for the cart there, whereupon the horses were inspanned.

In five minutes everything was ready, and the cart was standing in the roadway in front of the little gate. After he had looked to all the straps and buckles and seen that everything was properly packed, John went